

'MISTAKES' IN TRANSLATION: A FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH¹

Harry Aveling²

Abstract: Translators are regularly berated by various critics for their apparently endless "mistakes". All of us who are practising translators know this well. We labour for years to translate a text, in a sensitive and caring way, only to be told that "there is a comma missing on page 45", "this sort of bird is a pigeon and not a magpie", and "the subjunctive, which is a particular feature of this author's style in the original, is missing in the translation". Mistakes, mistakes, mistakes. In choosing this particular topic, I have the sense that it is one for which my critics, at least, consider me singularly qualified. In this article, I wish to consider here whether it is still meaningful to consider "mistakes" as a failure to achieve "equivalence, adequacy, accuracy, etc.," especially in these postmodern days in which the concept of multiple readings is well established. Part of my argument will also distinguish between what might be initially considered "dumb mistakes" (foolish errors) and "deliberate mistakes", the latter occurring when a translator specifically chooses to recreate the text in a way that seems to deviate from the literal surface meaning of the source text. Thirdly, I will suggest that the evaluation of translation needs not to insist that "This is wrong", but rather to ask "Why has the translator chosen this particular way of translation?" and "What is it that s/he is trying to bring across from the original text into the re-enactment of it?"

Key words : mistakes, translation, functionalist approach

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² **Harry Aveling, PhD.** is an Associate Professor of Indonesian and Malay in the Department of Asian Studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, and Adjunct Professor of Southeast Asian Literature at Ohio University. He holds the degrees of Doctor of Philosophy, in Malay Studies, from the National University of Singapore, and Doctor of Creative Arts, in Writing, from the University of Technology, Sydney.

A GOOD TRANSLATOR?

As a way of beginning, I would like to share with you some extracts from an article written by Howard Goldblatt and published in *The Washington Post* in April last year.³ The article opens with an “occupational testimonial” by Isaac Bashevis Singer: “There is no such thing as a good translator. The best translators make the worst mistakes. No matter how much I love them all, translators must be closely watched.” Goldblatt immediately follows this with a vulgar quotation from Milan Kundera: “Ye translators, do not sodomize us!” And for good effect he then adds the Italian tag: “*Traduttore-traditore*” (Translator = traitor). The article itself was headed: “*Translator*: Writer everyone loves to hate. Where does he get his nerve?” This reflects the two questions Goldblatt asks after these three quick jabs: “Who are these people everyone loves to hate, and, if they’re so bad, how do they get away with what they’re doing?” (Or, as Goldblatt later comments: “Is this a great job, or what?”) The answer to the first question is, of course: “I’m one of them. I’m a translator.”

In the middle of the article, Goldblatt talks about some of the possible reasons for the “inadequacy” of translation. These include the set nature of the original text and the changing nature of our language; the intricacies of cross-cultural research; as well as the ability of some languages to avoid adequate translation because “the words are simply unavailable or inefficient” (Goldblatt also quotes James Thurber, who, when told by a French reader that his stories read even better in French, replied: “Yes, I tend to lose something in the original”).

The article ends with Goldblatt’s confessedly “short, and very personal answer” to the second question, “Where does he get his nerve?”. His answer is:

Because I love it. I love to read Chinese; I love to write English. I love the challenge, the ambiguity, the uncertainty of the enterprise. I love the tension between creativity and fidelity, even the inevitable compromises. And, every once in a while, I find a work so exciting that I’m possessed by the urge to put it into English. In other words, I translate to stay alive. The satisfaction of knowing I’ve faithfully served two constituencies keeps me happily turning good, bad, and

³ “The Writing Life”, *The Washington Post*, Sunday, April 28, 2002, Book World, p. 10. My thanks to Dr Patricia Afable, of Chevy Chase, Maryland USA, for sending me this piece.

indifferent Chinese prose into readable, accessible, and – yes – even marketable English books.

These are, I'm sure all of us will agree, wonderful reasons for the act of translating. Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether Goldblatt has overcome the initial insults about the "mistakenness" of translation, or simply papered them over in the explanation of the "inadequacy" of translation as being the consequence of the "inevitable compromises" which "the tension between creativity and fidelity" requires in the "faithful" service of two constituencies.

Translators are occasionally sufficiently aroused to defend their mistakes from the cruel assaults of their perceived enemies, sometimes with considerable vigour. In his book *The Forked Tongue*, Raffel first notes with regret: "How angry I seem to make some people" (1971:147). But elsewhere, he firmly insists: as in a letter to an adviser about his *Poems from the Old English*: "(1) that I have in no case misrepresented the spirit of any poem, and (2) that my percentage of errors is infinitesimally smaller than he (and, implicitly, you) suggests" (1971:144).

Raffel's defence is built on a division similar to Goldblatt's distinction between "creativity" and "faithfulness". On one side of the divide are "the poets", among whom Raffel includes translators and the readers of poetry. On the other, are the "philologists, historians, archaeologists, and other essentially nonliterary persons" (1971:62). The translator's job is not philology but literature: "to recreate, for someone without the linguistic ability to do the job for himself, a pre-existing poetic experience" (1971:11) – or, further, "to interest and to educate, to please and to inform, the modern reader who knows not a word of the original tongue" (1971:150). Raffel admits in an earlier letter in the book:

"Scholars have rights, just like other people." ... "But after all, Old English scholars don't need a translation of *Beowulf* – not for themselves. They prefer the original – and I say more power to them ... When scholars employ a translation it is for other people, non Old English readers. Why? To teach them about oral-formulaic verse? I think not. The idea is to expose them to a meaningful dose of beauty as the Old English mind conceived and expressed it, to show them in concrete style what the Old English poet could and did do" (1971: 31).

Much of *The Forked Tongue* is an argument with “the scholars”, who are oriented towards the original language and not to the modern language of the translation. “[T]his,” says Raffel, “preserves that which is easiest to preserve and loses that which is hardest to preserve (i.e., keeps the scholarship clean, but muddies and destroys the poetry)” (1971:51).

In the essay “On Translating *Beowulf*”, Raffel further spells out these differences. The poet-translator’s aim is subjective: s/he masters the original in order to leave it, to produce lines which reflect the original and yet are successful poetry in the modern tongue; the poet cannot “condescend” to the original – s/he respects it as a poem and not as a source for something else; the poet translates what s/he likes, ignoring what s/he does not like (for s/he cannot translate it well or even decently). The scholar, on the other hand, is regulated by “gaps in knowledge, or the need for such-and-such to be done” (1971:67). The scholar works from the outside in, shedding as much light as s/he can, from any reasonable source. The poet works from the inside out (from s/his) inside out, attempting to withdraw into communion with s/his task (1971:68).

Raffel’s “mistakes” are the faults discovered by the scholarly critics, but they are also the inevitable result of a need “as a translator and as a poet to make – to discover really – an Englished incarnation which I can then possess without diminution” (1971: 160-1611). Like Goldblatt, Raffel redefines mistakes, by making them the apparently necessary consequence of poetry in translation, but he too cannot completely do away with them either (there are simply far fewer of them than the critics suggest).

FUNCTIONALIST’S MISTAKES

Surprisingly, the word “mistakes” is not one that often enters into the contemporary theorisation of translation – outside language learning classrooms, at least. In fact, very few of the some twenty books about translation I have on my home bookshelf have entries in their index on either “mistakes” or “errors” at all. And this includes the index to Laurence Venuti’s monumental anthology *The Translation Studies Reader* (Routledge, London 2000), although if one turns to the word “equivalence”, one is encouraged to “see also adequacy, accuracy, correspondence, fidelity, identity”.

Perhaps in accordance with this determination by translators themselves not to see “mistakes” as a meaningful tool of theory, the word

also fails to appear in the glossary to Christiane Nord's *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*, even though she devotes a section of the book to "Translation Errors and Translation Evaluation" (1997:73-79).

Nord's aim is, as the book's sub-title suggests, to present a range of "functionalist" approaches to translation. Her argument is founded on two initial premises. The first is that translation is a particular type of human "action", or more strictly speaking "interaction" between two or more agents, which is "first and foremost *intended* to change an existing state of affairs (minimally, the inability of certain people to communicate with each other)" (1997:19), involving a source text. Secondly, the target text is "functional", because it relates to the "expectations, needs, needs, previous knowledge and situational conditions" (1997:28) of the receiver for whom it is intended (1997:21). As Nord insists: "the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (*Skopos*) of the overall translational action", adding that: "[t]his fits in with intentionality being part of the very definition of any action" (1997:27). To underline her point, she cites Hans Vermeer's comment (Nord, 1997:29) that:

Each text is produced for a given purpose and should serve this purpose.

The Skopos rule thus reads as follows: translate/interpret/speak/write in a way which enables your text/translation to function in the situation in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want it to function.⁴

Or, in more graphic terms: "the end justifies the means" (Nord, 1997:29).⁵

As Foucault has reminded us, many arguments make most sense when we know who they are (implicitly or explicitly) directed against. Nord's enemy is "the traditional concept of equivalence as a constitutive feature of translation" (1997:35). She dismisses "equivalence" as "a static, result-oriented concept describing a relationship of 'equal communicative value' between two texts or, on lower ranks, between words, phrases, sentences, syntactic structures and so on" (Nord, 1997:35-36).

⁴ Hans J. Vermeer: *Skopos und Translationsauftrag – Aufsätze*. (thw – translatorisches handeln wissenschaft 2), Universitat: Heidelberg 1989, p. 20.

The suppositions of equivalence theory are as follows (Nord, 1997:84-91):

1. The target receiver takes the translator's interpretation for the intention of the sender.

This requires that:

The translator's interpretation should be identical with the sender's intention.

2. The function of the translated text is based on the interpretation of an interpretation of the sender's intention and on the target-cultural background knowledge and expectation of the target receivers.

This requires that:

The translator should verbalize the sender's intention in such a way that the target text is able to achieve the same function in the target culture as that which the source text achieved in the source culture.

3. In both the source and the target situations, the comprehension of the text world depends on the cultural background and the world knowledge of the receivers.

This requires that:

The target receiver should understand the text world of the translation in the same way as the source receivers understood the text world of the original.

4. The elements of the target-literature code can only achieve the same effect on their receivers as the source-literature elements have on theirs if their relation to the literary tradition is the same.

This requires that:

The effect the translation has on its readers should be the same as the one the source text has or had on its readers.

To a significant degree, Nord's book grows out of Reception Theory (*Rezeptionästhetik*) (1997:31), a "postmodern" critical theory in which the relative and non-judgemental concept of multiple and different readings is emphasized. This theory insists that:

The meaning or function of a text is not something inherent in linguistic signs; it cannot simply be extracted by anyone who knows the code. A text is made meaningful by its receiver and for its receiver. Different receivers (or even the same receiver at different times)

⁵ Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer: *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1984, p. 101.

find different meanings in the same linguistic material offered by the text. We might even say that a 'text' is as many texts as there are receivers.

Through her acceptance of the proposition that the translator is "just one of many possible readers" and that "the translator has an individual understanding of the source text" (1997:85), Nord is led to reject all of the suppositions about "equivalence" and the consequent requirements that have just been listed as traditional operating procedures for translators. From the functionalist point of view, the source text is no longer the first and foremost criterion for the translator's decisions; it is just one of the various sources of information used by the translator.

Like any text, Reiss and Vermer (1987) see the text used as a source in a translational action may be regarded as an 'offer of information' (Reiss and Vermeer 1984:72ff.) Faced with this offer, any receiver (among them, the translator) chooses the items they regard as interesting, useful or adequate to the desired purposes. In translation, the chosen informational items are then transferred to the target culture using the presentation the translator believes appropriate for the given purpose. In Vermeer's terminology, a translation is thus a new offer of information in the target culture about some information offered in the source culture and language (cited in Nord, 1997:25-26).

Such an action "dethrones" (the term is again Vermeer's) the source text in favour of the primacy of a multiplicity of readings and a multiplicity of possible ways of translation (Nord, 1997:25). "No one," as she insists, "can claim to have *the* source text at their disposal to transform it into *the* target text" (Nord, 1997:119). There is, indeed, no source text, "unless we really only mean source-language words or sentence structures" (Nord, 1997:31). No one translation can, therefore, ever be definitive, complete, or even absolutely correct. Contrary to Goldblatt's dichotomy, faithfulness being impossible, creativity is all that we have. The category of "mistakes" would henceforth seem to cease to exist.

The functional ideal which Nord proposes in the place of equivalence-based approaches depends on the alternative *Skopos* suggests that (1997:92-93):

1. The translator interprets the source text not only with regard to the sender's intention but also with regard to its compatibility with the target situation.

2. The target text should be composed in such a way that it fulfils functions in the target situation that are compatible with the sender's intention.
3. The text world of the translation should be selected according to the intended target-text function.
4. The code elements should be selected in such a way that the target-text effect corresponds to the intended target-text functions.

Nord does not completely abandon attributions of guilt. However, "translation errors", as she terms them, are not so much "mistakes" as "non-functional translations". They are variously offences against: "1. the function of the translation, 2. the coherence of the text, 3. the text type of text form, 4. linguistic conventions, 5. culture- and situation-specific conventions and conditions, 6. the language system" (1997:73)⁶ They are "inadequate" solutions to translation problems, rather than moral transgressions against an Absolute single being whose claims over us are clear and inescapable. How one measures "adequacy" is almost as hard to define as how one measured "equivalence" under the old system, except in the most literal of terms, and Nord never attempts to do so.

FUNCTIONAL INADEQUACIES

Functional inadequacies occur in four ways. They may be pragmatic translation errors, which are the result of "inadequate solutions to pragmatic translation problems such as lack of receiver orientation". Secondly, they may be cultural translation errors, which are "due to an inadequate decision with regard to reproduction or adaptation of culture-specific conventions". Thirdly, they may be linguistic translation errors, which are "caused by an inadequate translation when the focus is on language structures". Fourthly, and finally, they may be text-specific translation errors, which are "related to a text-specific translation problem and, like the corresponding translation problems, can usually be evaluated from a functional or pragmatic point of view" (Nord, 1997:75-78) The seriousness of these four types of errors, Nord says, can be ranked "top-down" (1997:76). Pragmatic errors are "among the most important a translator can make", but they are also "usually not

⁶ Citation drawn from Sigrid Kupsch-Losereit; "The problem of translation error evaluation", in Christopher Tietford and A.E. Hieke (eds) *Translation in Foreign Language Teaching and Testing*, Narr, Tübingen 1985, p. 172.

very difficult to solve” (Nord, 1997:76). The grading of cultural and linguistic translation errors depends on the functional significance of each.

She is, nevertheless, unwilling to give way to complete promiscuity, urging “function *plus* loyalty” as the dominant guides to righteous, or at least “adequate”, translating. As Nord explains:

Function refers to the factors, which make the text work in the intended way in the target situation. Loyalty refers to the interpersonal relationship between the translator, the source-text sender, the target-text addressee and the initiator. Loyalty limits the range of justifiable target-text functions for one particular source text and raises the need for a negotiation of the translation assignment between translators and their clients (1997:126).

The claim that a variety of strategies, often moving away from the linguistic surface of the source text, are necessary to produce a functional target text gives a more grounded precision to the claims of Goldblatt and Raffel. Nord’s argument helps us to understand that these strategies are not to be considered shortcomings or inadequacies, reluctantly accepted as abstract “poetry” but never as “scholarship” – they are deliberate and intelligent forms of both creativity and fidelity. Indeed they are the inevitable, different paths that translators must follow if they wish to create new texts based on their appropriately functional readings of the source-text. (Scholars, to paraphrase Raffel, are then entitled to translations as much as poets – but because their needs are different, they each require a different sort of translation.)

If these strategies of non-equivalence are to be considered “mistakes” at all then they are, in a paradoxical way, “deliberate mistakes”, intentionally undertaken in order to recreate the text in a way that deviates from the literal surface meaning of the source text so as to represent its other, deeper, features. Other errors, or “mistakes”, which are the result of our intentions being neither adequate nor appropriate, might be considered, in contrast, to be “foolish mistakes”, the product of ignorance but not of maliciousness. And ignorance can be overcome by “an adequate level of language and culture proficiency” (Nord, 1997:78).

This in turn leads me to the suggestion that, from a functionalist viewpoint, the evaluation of translation is often incorrectly phrased. The assertion is usually simply that “This is wrong”. Rather, functionalist

approaches – and a respect for intelligent purposeful action – would suggest the prior questions: “Why has the translator chosen this particular way of translation? What is it that s/he is trying to bring across from the source text to form part of the new target text?” Once we have decided that, we are in a better position to assess the adequacy or otherwise of a particular translation. The harshest criticisms are often the shallowest. As Raffel, again, laments judgement without understanding:

What difference does it make how deftly I discuss and generalise about my problems, my translator’s side of the endless dialogue of writer and reader, when discussion and understanding are virtually non-existent, there on the other side where what I in fact translate is actually read? I do not think that many people know how to read a translated poem, or know what is a good and what a bad poem. Worse still, I think too many people who believe they do know how to read and evaluate translations – and who are in a position, as critics and reviewers, to proclaim their beliefs publicly – are incredibly mistaken (1971:103).

There. The mistake is theirs, after all. I wish to conclude this paper with three simple, and random, examples of “deliberate mistakes” from my own work in translating Indonesian and Malay literature into English, made for what seemed to me to be good and sufficient reason.

The first was a simple error of objective fact in a Muslim Malay short story, where the author, Shahnnon Ahmad, referred to “sparkling red vodka overflowing the neck of the bottle” when the cork was first removed. Vodka is neither red nor bubbly. I substituted “golden champagne”. Literally wrong, but as Shahnnon was condemning the Westernised lifestyles of some overseas Malays, who (in his opinion) should not have been drinking alcohol of any kind, accurate enough at the level of moral condemnation. But, on the other hand, it has to be said that Shahnnon didn’t really know what he was talking about either. Should I have left the error as it was, and alerted the reader to that fact too?⁷

A second, and in some ways similar, case. While translating a history of Classical Malay Literature, I discovered that the history of the introduction of Islam to the Malay Peninsula had been written in such a way as to show a clear and definite progression from heretical to orthodox belief. Unfortunately this reassuring effect had been achieved by reversing the

sequence of the Muslim writers presented at the start of the relevant chapter. Historically, the earliest writers had been the most orthodox and later writers the least. I decided to put the pieces back into chronological order. Again, my translation was “wrong”: it did not represent the order of the text or the cultural beliefs of the contemporary community, which both produced and consumed the text. Was my responsibility to present the text as it was, and as many Malays believed ought to have been the historical case? Nord notes that: “the faithful reproduction of a factual error contained in the source text may be an inadequate translation if the target text is expected to be factually correct” (1997:73). I decided that my duty was to future students of Classical Malay Literature and that a blatant misrepresentation was inappropriate in a text-book. Clearly a functional choice, but I have lost an interesting (if annoying) insight into the current Malay understanding of Islam. Should I have done that?⁸

Thirdly, an example of poetic mistranslation, one I have described in a number of other places. The last line of the extremely beautiful poem “Asmaradana” (Love Song), by the major Indonesian poet Goenawan Mohamad, reads: “*Lewat remang dan kunang-kunang, kaulupakan wajahku, kulupakan wajahmu*”. In the poem, the hero Damar Wulan is taking his leave of princess Anjasmara, in order to meet certain death in battle against the invincible Menak Jingga. Literally, the line means: “Passing cloudy weather conditions and fireflies, you forget my face, I forget yours.” In Indonesian, there is a deep relationship between the base word “*lupa*” (to forget) and – not “*kunang-kunang*” (fireflies), but its homonym “*kenang-kenang*” (to remember). I decided to translate the line: “Passing cloud and embers, you forget my face, I forget yours”. The distant echo I wanted was with the antonym “remember”. Wrong again, And I still wonder if anyone ever heard the echoes.⁹

There, yet again. The number of mistakes to which I willingly confess are far fewer than my enemies accuse me of (three). “Mistakes”, good honest mistakes, deliberately made in the service of art and not from ignorance, are a necessary part of translation. If only our critics could see that!

⁷ “Al”, first published in *Selesai Sudah*, Heinemann Educational Books (Asia), Kuala Lumpur 1978. English translation *The Third Notch*, Heinemann Educational Books, Hong Kong 1980.

⁸ Harun Mat Piah et al: *Kesusasteraan Melayu Tradisional*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur, 1st edition 1993.

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⁹ "Asmaradana", in H. Aveling (ed and trans): *Contemporary Indonesian Poetry*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia 1975, pp. 218-9.